

Special Feature: Visas for Students, Part 2

In November, we focused on students interested in working in the United States during the summer holiday using a program known as summer work and travel. In that column, published November 25, 2009, we discussed the requirements, process, and purpose of that very popular summer program. This feature focuses on another visa, the student visa, which is designed for foreign nationals interested in pursuing post-secondary education (and in some cases, secondary education) in the United States. This column will focus on the different qualifications and uses of student visas, also referred to as the F1 visa.

Student Visas

The F1 student visa is designed for several different purposes, including attending primary or secondary school, enrolling at a post-secondary institution, or participating in a graduate or language program. There are some requirements and restrictions for anyone planning to attend school or an educational program in the United States.

Types of Study Permitted

1. Attending primary or secondary school in the United States: Individuals can apply to attend primary or secondary school in the U.S., though there are some limitations. More in-depth information about using the F1 visa for this purpose is found just below.
2. Attending post-secondary school in the United States: Individuals can apply to attend post-secondary school in the United States. In 2009, the U.S. Embassy in Kingston interviewed almost 2,000 F1 student visa applicants from Jamaica and the Cayman islands. Guidelines for how to apply to attend college or post-secondary school are also included below.
3. Participating in a language program: Individuals can apply to attend an English language program in the United States. These programs are generally designed for non-native English speakers.

Applying for the visa

Regardless of the type of study you are planning in the United States, every applicant must prove that they have a residence abroad, and connections to their home country, which would make them return at the conclusion of their studies. This is established during your interview with an officer at the U.S. Embassy. As part of your interview, the officer may also review transcripts or

diplomas, standardized test scores (such as CXC scores), and documentation of your ability to fund the course(s). These requirements are for all student applicants, whether applying to attend public, private, secondary, post-secondary, or language training programs in the United States.

Students, like other nonimmigrant visa applicants, are required to present at their interview a completed visa application, a valid passport, a photo, and a fee paid receipt from a local NCB branch. In addition to these documents, all student applicants should also have a form I-20, *Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant Student Status-For Academic and Language Students*. This form is issued by educational institutions, which have been approved by the Department of Homeland Security and labeled as established schools eligible to host international students.

Applicants should also pay the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) fee to register them in the internet-based program. This program, which is also managed by the Department of Homeland Security, tracks international students traveling to the United States and monitors students' activities to ensure that they are properly enrolled and participating in their program(s) of study. Students are able to pay the SEVIS fee and register with the program online using the following website: <http://www.ice.gov/sevis/>.

Students without an approved I-20 form will not be issued an F1 visa; likewise, students cannot be issued a visa until they have registered with the SEVIS program. While these are the basic requirements for all F1 visa applicants, certain applicants, including those attending public secondary school in the United States, have limitations on the use and validity of their visa(s).

Attending primary or secondary school

In the United States, similar to Jamaica, there are both public and private schools. Depending on the type of school you plan to attend, there are different visa requirements. For example, foreign citizens planning to attend public school in the U.S. using an F1 visa can only apply to attend high school, and the visas are limited to 12 months. In addition, these students must show that they are paying the full costs for their attendance at a public school.

Individuals are also eligible to apply to attend private primary or secondary school in the U.S., though they will need to show that they have sufficient funds to cover the costs of tuition (and room and board, if applicable). As mentioned above, students must show that they intend to return to their home country after their studies—interviewing officers will try to understand each applicant's situation and their purpose for studying in the United States, in addition to the ability to fund the education.

Attending post-secondary school

Most F1 applicants at U.S. Embassy Kingston apply to attend colleges or universities in the United States. Students can apply to attend public or private schools, large universities or community colleges, as well as nursing or other vocational training programs. Occasionally, we

find that Jamaican or Caymanian students are offered full or partial scholarships to attend these schools in the United States. Whether or not a student has been offered a scholarship, each applicant must show the ability to pay for the full cost of at least the first year of their studies in the United States; this can be fully or partially covered by a scholarship, paid by parents or relatives, or provided by a third-party sponsor.

Understanding your program and when to apply

All individuals interviewing for a student visa should begin the process of applying to schools as soon as possible since it can take some time to process your admission and the related paperwork through the school and the Department of Homeland Security. Once you have all of the required documentation mentioned above, you should schedule your visa interview. The U.S. Embassy can issue your student visa up to 120 days before you are scheduled to start classes, and we encourage you to schedule early. Each year, our office works very hard to expedite appointments for students, but you are best served by applying early for your school and your visa interview.

Keep in mind that, even if you have already received your student visa, you may only enter the U.S. up to 30 days prior to classes starting; any student wishing to enter the U.S. more than 30 days before the start of classes will need a B1/B2 visitor's visa. However, once you are in the U.S. on your F1 visa, you are permitted to travel back and forth to your home, such as for school breaks or holidays; this does not require a separate B1/B2 visa.

The most important advice for all F1 applicants is to be honest and forthcoming with the interviewing officer and be prepared to discuss your program of study. This includes speaking about your planned course(s), your school, and how you selected the program. Ultimately, the decision to issue any visa is based on the level of confidence that the interviewing officer has in the applicant in regards to their purpose of travel and intent to return home thereafter.

Many additional questions about student visas can be answered at the Department of State's website: www.travel.state.gov. Applicants can also access the U.S. Embassy Kingston's website for specific information on scheduling appointments and for access to the nonimmigrant visa application form: www.kingston.usembassy.gov.